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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 001707

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SUBJECT: FEARS OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISM GROWING

REF: A. 05 ANKARA 2030 (NOTAL)
[1](#)B. TASHKENT 1123 (NOTAL)
[1](#)C. TASHKENT 1643 (NOTAL)

Classified By: AMB. JON R. PURNELL, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The GOU has urged Tashkent community leaders to take robust measures to discourage Islamist tendencies among the public. An Embassy contact with strong local government connections said that officials expressed fear that Islamists may be planning disturbances ahead of the 2007 Presidential elections. They urged local leaders to remain highly vigilant, alleging that Islamic radicals are blending in with the population by posing as businessmen. They also expressed fears over the growing popularity of Islamic weddings, and recommended keeping a close eye on alumni of Turkish Fetullah Gulen high schools. Recent press articles have also urged citizens to wear "national" rather than religious dress. The GOU appears alarmed by the growing popularity of Islam, and is responding in a manner reminiscent of its crackdown on suspected Islamists following the February 1999 bombings. End summary.

MEETINGS CALL FOR TARGETING SUSPECTED ISLAMIC RADICALS

[1](#)2. (C) The GOU held a series of meetings in Tashkent in July urging local officials to take measures to discourage the growth of Islamism. According to an Embassy contact with excellent local government connections, GOU officials told participants that they should be especially vigilant in light of the approaching 2007 Presidential elections. The GOU officials claimed that Islamic groups "are preparing something." Officials noted that Islamic radicals often pose as businessmen by living "under a mask." Citing the Uzbek proverb, "If you shake the root, it will affect the branches," officials urged mahalla leaders to harass and intimidate Islamically-oriented citizens by pressuring their parents and family members. They also called on families to discourage their sons from mosque attendance. The GOU's renewed fervor in cracking down on suspected Islamists is reminiscent of its response to the February 1999 bombings. Following those attacks, GOU officials discouraged citizens from going to mosque, resulting in a dramatic drop in attendance.

[1](#)3. (C) Our contact told Poloff that meetings have been held in every Tashkent district with the participation of the Tashkent City Mayor, Tashkent City Hokim Toktayev, Police Chief Nakibov, Prosecutor's Office representative, National Security Service representative, Tashkent City Imam Anvar Tursunov, national and mahalla women's committee chairwomen, religious committee advisers, "Oq soqols" (mahalla leaders), and mahalla policemen. At a meeting on July 29, officials strongly scolded mahalla leaders from Tashkent's

Shayhontohur, Sobir Rahimov, and Uch Tepe districts for the "large number of Wahabbis" in those areas. (Note: Residents of Shayhontohur and Sobir Rahimov districts, both located in the old city, are reputed to be more pious than in the rest of the city. End note.) A participant at the meeting told our contact that it amounted to a Soviet-style "shaming ceremony."

ISLAMIC WEDDINGS SHOULD BE DISCOURAGED

¶4. (C) The officials reportedly expressed fear over the growing popularity of Islamic weddings, explicitly calling upon local leaders to stymie them. (Note: Islamic weddings are characterized by a strict separation between men and women, with only women attending the main wedding hall ceremony. Alcohol is banned. End note.) The meetings specifically called on local leaders to prevent "otin oyi" (female religious teachers) from reciting Islamic prayers to female guests, recommending that community leaders confiscate the microphone from such women. They also said that every effort should be made to pressure restaurant owners not to host such weddings. According to our contact, the GOU fears the influence of conservative Islamic weddings on the public, with such gatherings often attracting in excess of 300-400 guests. (Note: At the same time the GOU has also used official Islamic clergy to advocate for simpler, cheaper, wedding ceremonies. End note.)

KEEPING AN EYE ON ALUMNI OF TURKISH FETULLAH GULEN HIGH SCHOOLS

¶5. (C) The officials reportedly also warned of the threat posed by alumni of Turkish Fetullah Gulen high schools, noting that they were especially dangerous because of their "high intelligence, ability to stick together, and experience studying abroad." (Note: The Fetullah Gulen movement is a conservative Islamist movement with a broad following in Turkey, that has built a worldwide network of schools - ref A.) They added that the GOU has compiled a list of all the "Gulen" alumni. (Note: A Turkish diplomat told Poloff that the GOU shut down all 26 Gulen high schools in 2003 following a downturn in Turkish-Uzbek relations. While Gulen high schools were well respected for their high quality education, the GOU suspected that their curriculum included an illegal religious component. End note.) The fears over "Gulen" alumni could also reflect its wider concern over students and professionals who have benefited from any kind of foreign influenced, particularly Western style, education programs. The GOU has cracked down on studying abroad, especially in the United States, for fear of losing control over the future orientation of the nation's youth.

FAMILIES OF PRISONERS RECEIVING SUPPORT FROM ABROAD

¶6. (C) As in previous such GOU meetings, officials stated that wives and family members of prisoners convicted of religious extremism were receiving funds from international sources (ref B). The officials stated that they had intercepted funds being sent to family members from abroad, but that foreign sponsors were still providing clothes, food, and religious books to families and local schools. (Comment: Judging from previous such meetings, the GOU suspects Islamist extremist groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir of funding the families. End comment.)

WHERE IS YOUR NATIONAL DRESS?

¶7. (C) The meetings asked community leaders to pay close attention to citizens wearing Islamic head-dress, reportedly calling on them to discourage girls from wearing hijab.

(Note: Immediately following the February 1999 bombings, the GOU also cracked down on all outward signs of Islamist tendencies. In recent years however, the GOU's strict attitude to the hijab had been loosened somewhat. End note.)

In a related development, an August article in "Tashkent Turkiston" newspaper, founded by the state-run Kamolot Youth Movement, condemned wearing of the Islamically-oriented white skull cap for men, describing it as alien to Uzbek culture. (Note: Most Uzbek men prefer to wear the traditional "doppa," which varies in color and design depending on the region. End note.) Alleging that wearing white skull caps could turn into a symbol of "evil forces," the article urged men to wear national rather than religious dress.

18. (C) Comment: The GOU recognizes that Islamic observance, including mosque attendance, is rising. It is responding through a clamp down on perceived radical Islamists involving arrests of suspected extremists and a grass-roots approach aimed at nipping any signs of Islamist tendencies in the bud.

The GOU's July meetings targeting Islamists are likely connected to President Karimov's appointment of a new Mufti and State Advisor on Religious Affairs in August (ref C). The purpose seems to be the same in both cases, to combat a perceived threat from Islamic extremism.

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